
2. TALKING FOWL WITH MY FATHER

I. TURKEY: A CIRCULAR ARGUMENT

My father wants to know what I had for lunch today. I haven't called in months, but this is what interests him.

"I had a turkey sandwich," I say.

"Turkey," he says with clear disgust. Last year, my father's doctor gave him a list of safe foods, foods recommended for someone in my father's condition. Turkey was high on the list. My father has never liked turkey, except at Thanksgiving and only then because it comes with all sorts of things that he does like—fatty skin swaddled in strips of bacon, mashed potatoes, gravy, rolls and butter, ham (yes, ham). My father has always managed to treat turkey as the annoying but harmless relative who shows up once a year on the holiday, but now, now turkey has become my father's enemy.

Of course, he has numerous reasons for not liking turkey, first among them being that he likes beef. And while this might not seem like a reason, it is what my father tells me whenever I ask him why he doesn't like turkey.

"Because I like beef," he says.

"It's not an either/or question," I say. "It's like salt and pepper. You can like both of them. Now, if turkey and beef are sitting in a room alone and someone says that you can pick only one thing from the room, okay. Then, it's true—you can have turkey or you can have beef. But this isn't like that." Geraldine and I just spent our tenth anniversary in Greece, two blissful weeks walking where Plato and Socrates once walked, both of us nearly in tears at the thought of it, and here I am, one month later, having this conversation.

Reason number two: Because it is on his list.

Reason number three: Because my baby brother, whom he considers henpecked, eats turkey, in some guise or other, for dinner every night, or so my father claims. The one time that Geraldine and I visited my brother and his wife at their overly child-proofed house in a suburb of the Twin Cities, the four of us and their five children ate lunch together (turkey sloppy joes, for the record) while discussing the pros and cons of my brother's retirement plan. As he spoke, he stared at Geraldine as though he couldn't quite figure out who she was or how she had come to be sitting at his wood veneer table. His wife, whom I was meeting for the first and what would turn out to be the only time, said very little during the meal, but when I reached for the water pitcher, she noticed my raggedy fingernails and broke her silence to announce bitterly that my

brother chewed not just his fingernails but his toenails as well, addressing her complaint specifically to me, as though this were some sort of Lindquist family conspiracy for which I was equally answerable.

Geraldine and I flew back to San Francisco that evening, and when I called my father several weeks later to tell him that we had made it home safely, the first thing he wanted to know was what my sister-in-law had served for lunch. “Sloppy joes,” I told him, and there was a short pause of disappointment before my father, who has never cooked anything in his life, replied triumphantly, “I’ll bet they were turkey. You know, all she gives him is turkey.”

It is worth noting that the two parts of my father’s argument are interchangeable, that both can (and do) function as Conclusion or Premise, depending on what we are arguing about—whether my father is trying to convince me that my brother does eat turkey every day or that he is, indeed, henpecked.

Argument A. *My brother is henpecked because he eats turkey every day.*

In this argument, my father is demonstrating that my brother is henpecked, and so the daily eating of turkey becomes his first (and only) premise, one that he nonetheless shores up amply: “Turkey breasts, burgers, chili, lasagna. Everything’s turkey with her.”

Argument B. *Because my brother is henpecked, he eats turkey every day.*

Occasionally, one of us (usually me but sometimes my sister) will be foolish enough to suggest that our brother does not eat turkey every single day. My father, in this case, cites as proof the fact that my brother is henpecked, his argument succinct and unshakable: “Of course he does. She doesn’t even let him wipe his own ass.”

II. BROASTED CHICKEN: A STUDY IN SEMANTICS

“The café in Fentonville has two broasted chicken specials,” my father begins the conversation, not bothering with more standard pleasantries. “Mashed potatoes, a roll with butter, gravy, some kind of vegetable or other.” It is as though he is reading love poetry over the phone, his voice greedy and helpless.

I try to recall what broasted chicken is, how it differs from roasted chicken, what the addition of the *b* actually means, but the word has resurfaced after nearly two decades, dropped into the conversation with such ease that I know I cannot ask him to explain. “Broasted chicken,” he would reply automatically, the words so familiar to him that they are their own definition. Then, after the slightest pause, he would say it again, “Broasted chicken,” asserting the words in a way that means both “You never visit” and “What kind of world do you live in?” It is true that I visit infrequently, once every three or four years, just as it is true that I live in a world devoid of broasted chicken, which is not to say that there are no broasted chickens in San Francisco. Of course there are. There would have to be.

Sometimes, when I have not called my father in a particularly long time, he will begin the conversation by announcing, “A lot has changed.” Then, he will proceed to fill me in on events that happened years ago as a way of making clear my neglectfulness. “Your

sister got married,” he will say, though my sister has been married for seven years and has two boys, odd little fellows who refuse to speak to me on the telephone because they are busy cutting. Each boy has his own “cutting box,” a cigar box in which he keeps a pair of blunt-ended scissors and his most recent clippings, advertisements for cereal and batteries as well as carefully snipped photos of dead ducks and elk from his father’s hunting magazines. When I ask to speak to them, my sister holds out the receiver, and I hear Trevor, who just turned six, saying, “Tell her to call when we’re not cutting.”

“All they do is cut,” my father complains. My sister has told me that they are afraid of my father, afraid of his largeness, of the way that his feet seem poured into his shoes, the flesh straining against the laces so that they can no longer be tied. They are afraid of the way that he falls asleep talking and then awakens with a start a moment later, screaming, “What?” when they have said nothing because anger has become his most immediate response.

“I doubt you’d even recognize this place,” my father says at other times, referring to Morton, the town where I grew up, the town where he has always lived, except for a brief period just after high school when the Army borrowed him. This was in 1945, at the very end of the war, which was over before he got any farther away than Florida, but something about this experience put him off of the world, unnerved him so much that he forgot about college and went immediately back to Morton, picking up where he had left off, helping my grandfather run his hardware store and eventually taking it over himself. He continued to read, preferring characters to actual people, and maintained an extensive library, which he housed in our basement, choosing the only room that was windowless, as though having so many books were something best kept secret. Still, the world outside worked its way in, entering through small fissures in the house’s foundation that grew larger over time, filling our basement with water. Spring was particularly insidious, for as the snow outside slowly melted, the water level rose within, gradually, as though a tap had been turned on somewhere within the bowels of the house, a tap that none of us could locate, left open to a small but unstoppable trickle.

For many years, it was our job—my siblings’ and mine—to mop up the standing water, but as we got older, we procrastinated a bit more each time until finally our parents grew tired of our laziness, tired of their own nagging, and laid down thick carpeting throughout the entire basement, a cheap, urine-colored shag that they said would act as a giant sponge, and in this way, our basement was turned over to the mold. Throughout my childhood, I liked my father’s library better than any other room in the house, liked the moldy smell of books that hung in the air and clung to my clothing. In fact, I considered this the natural odor of books and wondered, each time I checked out a book from the school library, what they had done wrong that caused their books to smell as they did—of paper and ink and the sweatiness of children’s hands.

My father proceeds to give me an oral tour of Morton over the phone, block by block, resident by resident, as though proving my absence to me. “We’ve got Amish now,” he tells me. “Dan Klimek’s got them working out at the cardboard plant he

put in just east of town.” But when I ask who Dan Klimek is, my father uses the voice that he would use to explain broasted chicken to me if I were foolish enough to ask. “Dan Klimek. Danny Klimek. Of course you know Danny Klimek,” he says, his voice startled and angry, the syllables like waves beating frantically against the shore. This is a metaphor that would make no sense to my father, for he has lived his life surrounded by lakes and ponds, placid bodies of water whose waves do not beat or pound or crash but rather lap gently at the shore, a steady, soothing sound like that of a cat drinking milk.

Somehow, almost unintentionally, I became a teacher, a profession of which my father greatly disapproves, considering it a waste of my talents and, on some level, suspect. “Teachers and preachers,” he used to say, “never pay their bills.” For several years I taught high school English, which is how I met Geraldine, but eventually I grew tired of counting my successes in such meager ways, and so I quit and began instead to teach English to adults, to foreigners who need me and thus nod patiently when I require that they answer “How are you?” with “Well,” even though out in the real world people are quick to correct them, explaining, “You need to say ‘good.’ ‘Well’ just sounds like you’re kind of depressed.”

I begin class each Monday morning with a vocabulary quiz, testing them on words that we have encountered over the semester and compiled into a list, adding to it daily and occasionally winnowing it down, letting drop those words and expressions that might have meant something to them back home, where they were pilots and geneticists and science teachers, but contribute nothing to their lives here. They are not lazy people, my students, but on Monday mornings, overwhelmed by the week ahead after a weekend spent delivering pizzas and cleaning houses, they become lazy. They become lazy, and in their laziness, they write things like “Threaten is to make a threat” and “A shoplifter is someone who shoplifts,” knowing, of course, that I will mark their answers wrong, that in the margins next to them I will write what I always write: *A word cannot be used to define itself.*

III. THE PHEASANT AS OVERT SYMBOL

My father wants to FedEx me a pheasant.

“A pheasant?” I say. “I doubt that the post office delivers poultry.”

“Pheasants aren’t poultry,” he corrects me. “English teachers should know such things. They’re fowl, but they are not poultry. Poultry is domestic. I shot this bird myself out near the pond on Lekander’s farm.”

For the last year, according to my sister, my father has been using a broom as a cane, bristles up, leaning heavily as he goes from bedroom to kitchen, from kitchen to bathroom. I am fairly sure that this is the first broom he has ever held in his life. This is the same man, after all, whose mother washed his hair for him until he was forty, which is when he married my mother and she took over the task.

“When?” I say, keeping my voice casual. “When did you shoot it?”

“How would I know when I shot it?” he replies impatiently.

“Well, when was the last time that you hunted?” I ask, feigning ignorance. I know the answer to this, know that he has not hunted in five years because my brother-in-law Mike, who used to take my father hunting, stopped hunting five years ago after his brother, while looking up and tracking a flock of mallards with his eyes, tripped over a rock and discharged his gun into Mike’s buttocks. The doctors were able to extricate all of the shot, but for weeks sitting had been uncomfortable if not downright painful, which meant that Mike had also had to endure the embarrassment of explaining to his clients why he suddenly preferred to stand during sales calls.

Mike is a fertilizer salesman in Fargo, North Dakota, a description that sounds like the set-up for a joke here in San Francisco, but in Fargo, where he and my sister really do live and where he really does sell fertilizer, having a sister-in-law who lives in San Francisco with her girlfriend is considered just as funny. I like my brother-in-law, whom I have met only twice, both times during visits that Geraldine and I made to Fargo. The first time, we shook hands and he said that I was like a plague of locusts, visiting once every seven years. I laughed because it was funny and sort of true, wondering whether the allusion was inspired by religion or profession. I suspected the latter: locust plagues struck me as the sort of thing that a fertilizer salesman from North Dakota would know about.

“Locusts are actually the only invertebrates considered kosher,” said Geraldine, addressing both of us, though she and Mike had not yet been introduced.

“Really?” I said, and then, “Mike, this is Geraldine.” They nodded at each other in a decidedly Midwestern way, though Geraldine is anything but Midwestern.

“Yes, not all species of course,” she continued, her tone turning cautionary. “Actually, I believe that only the Yemeni Jews still know how to determine which species are kosher.”

“Are you Jewish?” Mike asked Geraldine, who, despite the deceptive first name, is Jewish, though Jewish strictly in the “isn’t it interesting that locusts are kosher?” sense.

“Yes,” she replied. “Culturally speaking.” Mike nodded deeply as though this were a distinction of relevance in Fargo, North Dakota.

Later that afternoon, as we sat playing with the boys, my sister turned to Geraldine and said, “I hear you’re Jewish.”

“News travels fast,” I said.

“Jewish?” said Mike’s mother, who was also visiting for the day, though in her case, from just sixty miles away, a town called Florence, which is where Mike grew up. Florence, North Dakota, my sister had informed me, was even smaller than Morton, about a third the size, which put the population at around seventy people, two of whom were sitting here in front of me. There was something vaguely impressive about this.

“You know about the Holocaust?” Mike’s mother said. I could see that Geraldine was bothered by this question and remained so even later when I explained to her what I knew to be the truth: it wasn’t that Mike’s mother believed Geraldine might actually be unaware of the Holocaust but rather that she was establishing her own

awareness, broaching the subject the way that we are taught to where I come from—by turning our knowledge into a question. Of course, only I could tell that Geraldine was annoyed, and when she answered, her voice was gentle, reassuring. Yes, she told Mike’s mother, she did know about the Holocaust, and Mike’s mother nodded, pressing the back of her fork tines against the crumbs of her rhubarb cake. “It was a terrible thing,” she said.

The next time Geraldine and I visited my sister and brother-in-law, we flew into Minneapolis and drove west along 1-94 to Fargo, stopping in Morton to pick up my father, who alternated between ignoring Geraldine completely and ceremoniously reciting things for us in Swedish—poems and songs and jokes, which he made no attempt to translate though he did chuckle to let us know when something was funny. My father is entirely Swedish, a fact that gives him enormous pleasure. We, his children, are *mixed* because my mother was half Norwegian. “The Norwegians have always been arrogant,” my father reminded us frequently when we were young, a comment that he generally made out of the blue. Once, sighing heavily, he had added, “In my day, we buried the Norwegians and Swedes in separate cemeteries.” (“You see,” Geraldine said, laughing, when I related this to her. “There’s no hope for the world. Even the Swedes and Norwegians can’t get along.”)

He had spoken Swedish as a boy, forgotten it, and then relearned it almost fifty years later from a retired Swedish professor who settled on one of the lakes near Morton and occasionally came into my father’s hardware store to buy things that my father considered odd, by which he meant odd for a man to buy—the little skewers that are set into the ends of hot corn cobs, Mason jars, plastic sunflowers that spin frantically in the wind. Once, early on, the professor had come in wearing a button that said N.O.W, and my father had asked him, “Now what?” I was in graduate school at the time, living far away in Colorado, and when my father related this story to me, I could tell, even over the phone, that he was disappointed I did not laugh. I wanted to, but I felt that it was dangerous to encourage my father in such ways.

“It’s a club of some sort,” my father told me. “A club for women.”

“Anyone can join,” I said. “It’s the National Organization for Women.”

“Yes,” my father said. “For women.”

“He’s not married,” he continued a moment later. “Never has been.” I understood my father’s point, the suspicion that surrounded men and women of a certain age who had never married. My father had remained single until forty, and sometimes I thought that he had married my mother simply to escape being the object of gossip and speculation. In fact, I was hard pressed to discover any other reason, for my parents had been ill-suited for each other, a state of affairs foreshadowed on their first date, when my father lent my mother a book to read so that they would have something to discuss on their second. My mother had returned the book to him unread, claiming that she could tell from the cover, which was blue, that the book was not going to be about anything.

My father had shown me the book once, a heavy tome called *Gus the Great*. He had read it and *The Great Gatsby* one after the other and, for this reason (and perhaps

because both titles included “Great”), always thought of them together, though he had much preferred the former. When I asked him what *Gus the Great* was about, he said that it had to do with the circus. “The circus?” I replied. I had never known my father to have any interest in the circus. “Yes, but that’s not what it’s about,” he said. “Not really. Anyway, it’s much funnier than that Gatsby book.” Later, when I finally read *Gatsby*, I was puzzled by this comment, for there was no way to think that Fitzgerald had been attempting humor, but I eventually realized that my father was simply saying something about himself, about what he had needed in his life at that time.

Ten years ago, I spent a week with my father shortly after my mother died. Geraldine and I had just met a few months earlier, and we spoke daily by phone. This was stressful, for it required me to juggle two conflicting emotions, the elation that I felt when I picked up the telephone and heard her voice and the guilt I felt at not hiding it better. Furthermore, we were firmly in the getting-to-know-each-other stage, yet I never felt truly like myself in my parents’ house, where my past self still lingered oppressively. I worried about this at night as I lay in my old bed, the top half of a bunk bed on which I used to pile everything that was important to me, books mainly, a few photos, and the beginnings of a stamp collection that never got off the ground. I had not mentioned Geraldine to my father, thinking that it hardly seemed an appropriate time to do so, but he was nosy about such things, nosy in a stoic, Minnesotan sort of way, which meant that he would never come right out and ask who called each evening at eight but instead took matters into his own hands. On the fifth night, he retired earlier than usual, and, when the phone rang, he picked up his bedroom extension quickly.

“For you,” he announced in a loud, flat voice that carried easily down the hallway, and when I picked up, I could sense him there—hostile but, I could not help but think, perhaps secretly wanting to understand this thing that made no sense to him, and so, for just an instant, I considered letting him listen.

“Yes?” I said brusquely, greeting Geraldine the way I would a telemarketer.

There was a pause. In a low, confused voice, she asked, “Are you okay?” and I saw at once the folly of thinking that I could inhabit both lives at once.

“Dad, I’ve got it,” I said sternly, and I heard the double click of him hanging up as it traveled across the line and through the house.

My parents were both packrats, had become even more so during my mother’s illness, and I felt it my duty, during that visit, to establish some order. The first morning, wishing to take stock of the worst of it, I ventured down into the basement, where I had not been in many years. The carpet was brittle, almost crunchy, under my feet, and when I touched the paneling that ran the length of the hallway, my hand came away chalky with mold. So overwhelmed were my other senses, even taste, that my hearing felt dull by contrast. As the mold spores settled in my lungs, I began to breathe heavily, wheezing as I made my way through the rooms counting sofas (or davenportes as we had always called them). I found five, then opened the door of my father’s library onto a sixth, a slippery horsehair settee that blocked the entrance so that I had to climb over it to get in. The two bottom shelves held books bloated with

water. I removed one of them, the illustrated *Rip van Winkle* that I had liked as a child, its cover now warped and wavy, the pages stuck permanently together, rendering its contents inaccessible.

From there, I entered the main room, which had once contained the house's infrastructure: my father's workshop, the laundry area, a wood-burning stove, and three freezers. Only the freezers still hummed with purpose. Here, another smell hung in the air, vying with the mustiness, a distinctly porky odor, the source of which it took me several minutes to locate: beside one of the freezers sat a green, plastic bushel basket filled with lard, its white, fatty surface embedded with dead insects and dust. Still, compared with everything else, the lard seemed manageable, and I decided to begin with it, to lobby for its disposal that night at dinner, when my father's mood would surely be elevated by the presence of food.

Dinner, however, got off to a bad start. "Dinner," I called down the hallway at six thirty. Several minutes passed, and I called again before walking down to my father's bedroom, where I found him propped up on his bed reading the newspaper.

"Didn't you hear me calling you for dinner?" I asked.

"I heard," he said, not looking up. "But in this house, we eat dinner at noon. If you want me to come for supper, you'll need to say so."

There was a long, silent standoff between us. "Fine," I said at last. "Supper is served." My father got up and followed me down the hallway to the table. He sat down, and I set his plate in front of him. "Shouldn't we throw out that lard?" I asked. "That big tub that's just sitting there in the basement?"

"Leave it," he said. "I might make soap."

"Really? And when, exactly, did you start making soap?"

"I said I might make it, but I can't if you go around throwing out the lard."

"Fine," I said after only the slightest pause. "How about the toasters then?"

On a shelf near his worktable I had found nineteen of them, the two-slicers from early in their marriage pushed behind the family-size four-slicers, every toaster from my childhood and then some, the potential for sixty-eight simultaneous slices of toast (I had counted) gathered in a state of disrepair.

"What about them?"

"Well," I said. "They're toasters. When they break, you throw them out."

"In my time, we fixed things. We didn't just toss them on the trash heap."

"Well, they aren't fixed. They're broken, and they've been broken for over thirty years, some of them. Listen," I said then. "I've arranged for a truck to come tomorrow to haul away the sofas . . . davenportes before they become even more infested with mice than they already are."

"Mice need a place to live," he replied fiercely, though I had never known him to be anything less than absolute in his treatment of mice.

"Yes, they do," I agreed. "And tomorrow they'll be living at the dump with the davenportes."

"They closed that dump years ago." He studied his food. "What is this anyway?"

"Fajitas," I said. "It's everything that you like—beef, peppers, onions."

"Everything I like is to have it fried up in a pan with some Crisco and salt. Not

this,” he said. We both knew that I had prepared it this way, grilled under the broiler, letting the grease collect in the pan so that it could be discarded, because the doctor had told him that he needed less fat in his diet—less fat, less salt, less food.

“That’s not how I cook,” I said.

“Well, this is not how I eat,” he said, and he picked the plate up and turned it upside down on the table.

When the two men arrived the next day to haul away the sofas, my father waited until they had carried the fourth one up from the basement and jimmed it around the corner at the top of the stairs before he came out and instructed them to put every single davenport back exactly where they had found it. They did, of course, without even looking my way.

That afternoon as my father napped in front of the television, I went through all three freezers, throwing out anything that looked suspect, peas and string beans and berries that had taken on the desiccated look of long-frozen food. There were rings and rings of potato sausage, which the entire family had always been involved in making but only my parents had liked; my siblings and I could never overcome the memory of making it, the bushel baskets of potatoes that it took us the entire day to peel, the long night of grinding the blackened potatoes together with pork and venison and onions, of stuffing this into pig intestines, and then, at dawn, when we were feeling nauseated from lack of sleep, the stench of leftover meat being fried up for our breakfast.

I filled five garbage bags, which I dragged outside and lifted into the garbage cans lined up behind the house. There were eight of them, eight garbage cans for a man who did not even discard empty pill bottles. Then, because I felt I had earned a break, I walked into town, ducking my head or lifting my hand back at people as they drove by, at these strangers for whom waving was a reflex. My father would have known every one of them, of course, though my father would never have taken a walk along the highway like that because it would have caused people to talk, and more than anything, my father did not want people speculating about his business.

Years ago, when his doctor first began to mention diet and exercise, before my father decided to stand firm against anything that might benefit his health, he went through a brief period of highly anomalous behavior—namely, following his doctor’s advice. For almost two months, he and my mother drove back into town each night after dark and locked themselves inside their store, where, for forty-five minutes, they walked. They went up and down the same aisles where they spent their days, past gopher traps and sprinklers and all kinds of joinery, my father in the lead, my mother several steps behind. When my mother accidentally let this secret slip and I asked why, why, when they could be out looking at lakes and trees and fields of corn, they preferred to walk indoors, she said, “You know your father doesn’t want people knowing his business.”

I walked for five hours that day until I no longer felt mold each time I breathed in, and when I returned, my father said, “What did you do? Walk all over the county?” He was still in front of the television, and he spoke in a cranky way that implied that he had spent the entire afternoon sitting right there, waiting for me to return, but the

next morning when I got up early to cart the garbage cans down to the road for pickup, they were all empty. While I had been out walking around letting people know my business, my father had undone all of my work, returning everything to the freezers. That was day three. We spent the last four days of my stay in idle silence.

Ten years have passed since that visit, but it's right there between us—the unspoken betrayal—when I ask my father how long ago he shot the pheasant that he now wants to FedEx me. Finally, I say what I mean—“That pheasant must be at least five years old”—and he hangs up on me; I, ever my father's daughter, wait until the next evening to call back, and when I do, though I let the phone ring thirty, and then forty, times, there is no answer.

This, I suppose, is the moment when other children pause to consider broken hips, burst hearts, a sudden, irrevocable loosening of the mind. “He's in the bathroom,” calls Geraldine from the study, her voice overly reassuring, for she too knows his pattern: startled by the first ring, setting aside his book on the second, picking up, always, on the third, answering, “Yut,” as though the ringing were a question. “Dad?” I always reply, this, too, a question, and then, before we begin talking, he tells me which phone he is on, kitchen or bedroom, because he wants me to be able to picture him—where he is sitting, what he is seeing—as our voices float back and forth across the distance.

Tonight, the rings adding up in my ear, I imagine him, broom in hand, descending those sixteen treacherous steps, both feet resting briefly on each one, until he stands surrounded by a lifetime's worth of broken toasters and davenports, a roomful of books nearby, their words trapped between waterlogged pages. The freezers are open, all three of them, lids tilted up like coffin covers, and he pauses in their white glow, trying to take it all in: this wealth before him, this carpet dissolving beneath his feet.